

LEARNING LOSSES TO SECURE THE PATH OF VICTORY: EXPERIENCE OF STRUGGLE AS A COROLLARY THEME IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S *FUNNY BOY*

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ABSTRACT

Theme of struggle runs as a corollary in all the aspects of this novel. Realisation of identity for a boy who is gifted with “otherness” comes at a high price, but the many tragedies he witnesses not only hurt his consciousness, but also makes his will stronger and determined. Arjie personifies the struggle and the much-wished victory for many of the frustrated marginals whose battles against racism and patriarchy had been futile and defeating.

KEYWORDS: Racism, Homosexuality, Hatred, Violence, Identity, Struggle, Patriarchy, Minority

INTRODUCTION

So far as the main themes are concerned, Canadian novelist of Sri Lankan Tamil origin, Shyam Selvadurai's first novel *Funny Boy* (1994) focuses on Tamil-Sinhalese racial hatred and the outcomes of the violent conflict between these two races; and also on the maturation of the homosexual self in the protagonist through various ups and downs. But, the narrative technique of dividing the story in six chapters entices the reader's attention to another theme which comes as a corollary from both the major subjective themes of the novel—the compulsion of struggle that time and society impose on an individual who is either bestowed with, or aspires to align himself/herself with “otherness”. The novel repeatedly narrates how this struggle frustrates the dreams and handicaps the individuality of a person. But, interestingly, each defeat enriches the main protagonist with experiences, which ultimately help him to realize and celebrate in flying colours his individuality of otherness. This paradoxical pattern endows the novel with vitality and marks the imminent break of Arjie and his family from their native land with a note of hope, when apparently the time and atmosphere of their scheduled departure are unquestionably hostile.

All the first four chapters initiate the reader to characters who fashion tendencies of rebellion against the mainstream socio-political and racial order. Frustratingly, although not unexpectedly all these characters fail to pursue their vocations at the face of the cruel self-stabilizing pressure of the ‘center’. The marginality of their dreams causes their nipping at the buds. The first chapter “Pigs Can't Fly” shows how little Arjie's love for girlie games brings forth for his family the association of social shame that orthodox patriarchy aligns with such otherness. Arjie is born in a society where a boy child interested in girlie games and dresses is regarded as “funny” in a derogatory and disgusted way. The over-anxious attentions of his father, Ammachi and Kanthi aunty successfully thwarts the natural development of Arjie's mental orientation, and in the process, introduces the child to pain. In the second chapter, Radha aunty's affections for her Sinhalese friend Anil Jayasinghe are systematically crushed by a fate which indulges in overwhelming racial hatred. The determination of the young lovers to defy their prejudiced families suddenly finds the distance between themselves insurmountable after the attack on Radha in the train. Radha's painful understanding of the great schism between the two

racism is eloquently accompanied by the ominous symbol of hatred experienced decades earlier by their family—the portrait of her grandfather. Arjie’s mother’s secret love for Daryl Brohier struggles against both the social stigma of adultery and political violence engendered by the vindictive state. The possibility of their romantic affair is doomed, so is the potential of impartial journalism in a terror-infested country. The elderly civil rights lawyer Q.C. Appadurai’s stoic comment dissuading Nalini from getting further into the matter:

These days one must be like the three wise monkeys. See no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil.”(141)—

Quintessentially highlights the claustrophobia that maligns the then political air. The fourth chapter titled “Small Choices” records the impossibility of a racial minority youth to prosper unhindered in an oppressive society. Jegan Parameswaran’s earlier associations with the Tamil Tigers and Gandhian movements and his present connections with the Tamils at the stadium who, arguably plans to assassinate the “traitor” Tamil politician, mess up not only his ambitions, but also the peace and prosperity of the Chelvaratnam family, leading Arjie’s father to fire Jegan against his will.

Arjie the child narrator plays a crucial part in the particular thematic development of the novel that this paper is concerned about. Not only he learns defeat for himself in the very first chapter, but also he is a very trustworthy confidante to all the apparent transgressors. Radha aunty uses him as a child companion on her secret rendezvous with Anil, Amma takes him with her in the highland tea-garden resort while she spends her few romantic days with Daryl while her husband has gone abroad on business trip, Jegan confides to Arjun about his past Tiger connections. All these facts help Arjie to experience their struggle from close proximity; and also hint at the fact that Arjie is a mentally gifted child, so far as the emotional quotient is concerned. Each of these defeats hurts and matures Arjun—making him feel melancholy and lonely:

“Caught between the boy’s and girl’s worlds, not belonging or wanted in either” (39);

and, losing his world of innocent romance:

“.....How I had thought that weddings could not be anything but magical occasions. How distant that time seemed, a world I had left far behind.” (99)

Arjie’s idea of love and marriage, solely developed on the basis of Sinhala films and love-comics, experiences a brutal disillusionment at the engagement between Rajan Nagendra and Radha aunty. Janaki’s pounding at the ‘mol gaha’ (large pestle) becomes a metaphorical representation in Arjie’s subconscious of the pestle of life crushing loves and dreams as he ruminates:

“As I listened to its rhythmic sound, I thought of her love-comics and how fervently I had believed in them; believed that if two people loved each other everything was possible. Now, I knew that this was not so.” (100)

On one point, Arjie and Amma share the same boat, and are, to some extent, sympathetic towards each other. From the very childhood, Arjie is a rebel soul. Unlike the imitating and jealous cousin Tanuja, Arjie has his own original ideas of beauty, grace and perfection—epitomized by the game of ‘bride-bride’. He understands himself better than others and defies the orthodox prescription of boyish games like cricket. Finally, he is brutally disciplined by the figure of Ammachi, a seemingly powerful matriarch, acting actually to preserve patriarchal values. As the story progresses, the reader understands that Nalini had also had to confide to patriarchy by not marrying Daryl, her pre-nuptial lover because he was a Burgher—a member of a Srilankan white race with Dutch origin. While stopping Arjie from playing his favourite game ‘bride-bride’ after father’s command, Amma hesitates:

"Life is full of stupid things and sometimes we just have to do them." (20)

Little Arjie observes:

"I had broken her cheerful façade, forced her to show how much it pained her to do what she was doing, how little she actually believed in the justness of her actions." (20)

Nalini's initial humiliation and defeat, perhaps, leads her to resuscitate her relationship with Daryl—an act of defiance against tradition and society. This can also be interpreted as her psychological act of compensation for her treatment of Arjie at the pressure of the family. In fact, teenage Arjie's triumphant celebration of otherness through the realization of his homosexuality gathers its strength in many ways from his mother. Amma had always been different—for her, Anil, anxiously asking about Radha's health at the late hour, was "Poor man" (87), while for Kanthi aunty he was "not wanted here (there)" (91). Amma, the modern fashionable and fun-loving elite Srilankan Tamil lady remains blissfully unaware of the racial violence and military atrocities that were taking place in Jaffna until her lover Daryl becomes a direct victim of it. The villagers' insecurity and hatred against the upper class people that they encounter at Somratne's village enlightens her cynically, and she stops her pursue of justice. It was Amma who asked Arjie to invite Shehan for lunch against the will of Appa and Diggy—the alpha male and the eldest son of her family.

Despite repeated warnings from his elder brother Diggy about Soyza:

"That Soyza could easily lead you down the wrong path." (256)—Arjie remains startled by the fact that:

"That difference within me...was shared by Shehan. I felt amazed that a normal thing—like my friendship with Shehan—could have such powerful and hidden possibilities." (256)

Arjie's deep feeling of guilt, contempt and loathing immediately after his first sexual intercourse with Shehan/Soyza at the garage can be attributed to his 'superego' that makes him feel that he has committed a great crime against his family and society. Yet, at that night, Arjie remains restless in his bed:

"Torn between my desire for Shehan and disgust at that desire." (266)

Gradually, Arjie returns to his own promised path of judgment that can distinguish between the social demand and the wish of an individual—a path well-travelled by Arjie since his childhood, but hitherto unsuccessfully:

"I saw that I had misjudged what we had done in the garage. Shehan had not debased me, but rather had offered me his love. And I had scorned it." (269)

Arjie's sabotaging his recitations at the Annual Prize-Giving Day in order to depose the old fashioned tyrant Black Tie comes as a desperate act of passion where he exploits his temporary position of power to save his beloved Shehan from daily tortures that had almost led him to commit suicide. Arjie jumbles the two poems and mars the scope for the Principal's speech that was prepared to be built on those poems. Black Tie's tired and defeated look announces Arjie's most significant victory against a society that rules and subdues rebels by domination and violence. The same time also marks Arjie's realization of personal homosexual love over the love of his family. He says to Shehan:

"I did it for you...I couldn't bear to see you suffer any more." (284)

The fact that Arjie's individuality has learned to soar above his familial help or hindrance becomes clear when he realizes and celebrates his "otherness" more confidently than ever, not without a little sense of pain at the prospect of

mental distance from his kins:

“As I gazed at Amma, I felt a sudden sadness. What had happened between Shehan and me over the last few days had changed my relationship with her forever. I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn’t understand and into which they couldn’t follow me.” (284-285)

The theme of struggle and conflict runs in a parallel way deep in the novel *Funny Boy*—most of the characters—Arjie, Amma, Radha aunty, Kanthy aunty, Daryl Brohier, Jegan Parameswaran, Mahagodage Somaratne, Aunty Dorris and Shehan have to fight and suffer against irrational oddities that are presented by society, making the story a saga of the infringed ones. On the other hand, on a macroscopic level, apparently dominating characters like father, Ammachi and the principal Black Tie also struggle against the society. Father has to leave a flourishing business in hospitality industry and almost all of his assets for an uncertain life in Canada; Ammachi, the daughter of a man who had been brutally killed by the Sinhalese in the riots of 1950s, is burnt alive along with her husband in her car on the streets of Colombo in broad daylight in front of many people; Black Tie’s old colonial English ideas of running a respectable school based on principles of cosmopolitanism, discipline, secularism and strictness face defeat in front of the racist, regionalist, discriminating and favourist gospel of the “snake in the grass” (213) vice principal Mr. Lokubandara, who is a “political appointee”, and a cousin of a Sinhalese cabinet minister. The fall of the secular principal is symbolically related to the compulsory transmigration of this Tamil Christian family from a Buddhist and Sinhalese dominated Sri Lanka that destroys the lives of her minorities in a sinister way. A well-disseminated desire is discernable in this society that demands the annihilation of the Tamils from Sri Lanka. The Tamil Tigers are fighting for the separation of the much disputed Tamil dominated territory of Jaffna situated at the far northern end of the country. The readers know about the state-sponsored atrocities and innovative techniques of torture involving red chilly, honey and ants on innocent Tamils in Jaffna region from Daryl Brohier, the Sydney Morning Star reporter, whose body washes ashore after he visits Jaffna for reporting. Nalini finds her phone tapped, the police put the blame of robbery in Daryl’s room on the servant boy Somaratne. Jegan forms a perfect example of the fate of an intelligent and able-bodied Tamil youth in this racist Sri Lanka that forces her minorities to choose extremist politics through her marginalization and ostracism permeated hatefully through all the levels of social interactions. He is harassed by the police without any proof of his involvement in the proposed crime. The sons and companions of the racist Sinhalese industrialist Banduratne Mudalali harass Jegan at every opportunity for his identity. In this country, every riot brings the anxiety of being killed or losing some property; the Government intentionally delays in announcing curfews allowing the goons to wreck more havoc; the president does not express any sympathy for what the Tamils have suffered in the riots, neither does he condemn the actions of the thugs. The successful and disillusioned Appa only agrees to move to Canada when both his house and his hotel are burnt and looted, only to be followed by the merciless killings of his parents. Arjie notes:

“I am glad he said that, because I long to be out of this country. I don’t feel at home in Sri Lanka any longer, will never feel safe again.” (304)

Brilliantly, even at the face of this terrible insecurity of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, Canada is presented in the novel in a most practical way—not as a hallowed and paradisaical place of the First world, but where the family would have to live in another person’s flat. Their going abroad is not going to be about making snowmen, having snowball fights, and eating scones and blueberry jams, but about being penniless refugees. As Arjie learns the facts that Appa is not allowed to take his money out of the country because of the government regulations, and each of the members would be allowed to

carry only five hundred pounds, the fear of poverty strikes him for the first time in his life:

“Today I watched a woman running from car to car at the traffic lights, her hand held out, and I wondered if this would be our plight in Canada.” (309)

One of the great silver linings in the novel is Arjie's developing love for Shehan against social, patriarchal and racial gap. After the destruction of their house, Shehan tries to cheer Arjie up by the proposal of going to a matinee. Arjie self-consciously realizes:

“Shehan was a Sinhalese and I was not. This awareness did not change my feelings for him, it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him.” (302)

Belief and hope on humanity are also preserved in this atmosphere of primitive hatred. Sena uncle and Chithra aunty remain family friends and business partners of Chelvaratnam family against all that fierce racial schism between them. The irony of Amma comforting a crying Chithra aunty after the incineration of Chelvaratnam house is not missed by Arjie's intricate observation:

“There was something ironic about that...Yet I understood it. Chithra aunty was free to cry. We couldn't, for if we started we would never stop.” (298)

Sena uncle and Chithra aunty refuse to let them leave even after they started getting phone calls calling them traitors for sheltering Tamils, and the threat that their house too will be burnt that night by patriotic Sinhalese. The reader also notes how Mr. Samarakoon, the good Sinhalese manager of Appa's hotel keeps saving it from its impending destruction by sweet-talking the rioters for a long time until the final catastrophe. The Pereras help the Chelvaratnams to escape the attack on their house and save their lives. The other Sinhalese neighbours too supply them with vegetables and other raw provisions.

The novel ends with Arjie ready to face the world with a completely new mindset that had developed through many bitter experiences of pain and frustrations—direct and indirect, personal and familial, mental and physical. But for Arjie “Yet all experience is an arch where through/ Gleams the untraveled world” (Ulysses). Life helps to bolster Arjie's personality and individuality, and that is the final path of victory that the novel proposes.

CONCLUSIONS

The theme of struggle runs deep as a corollary in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*. It is manifested in multifaceted ways and in various subjects. Despite the apparent distances and gaps between their various subject positions, most of the characters are subjected to social, racial, economical or sexual oppression against which they launch a fierce struggle. Not many apart from the protagonist appear victorious at the end, but the courageous tenacity of Arjie owes a lot to the other strugglers. It is a tale of relentless battle of the marginals, defeating all set-backs and depressions against the tyrants called establishment and society.

REFERENCES

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